

ARTS EDUCATION

Big Sky Arts Education

By Emily Kohring
Director of Arts Education
bigskyartsed.wordpress.com



Some is not enough

In May, First Lady Michelle Obama hosted a talent show at the White House to spotlight the success of Turnaround Arts, a public-private partnership led by the President's Council on the Arts and Humanities that "uses the arts to help narrow the achievement gap, increase student engagement and improve the culture and climate in the country's highest poverty schools."

The program began as a pilot in eight schools, including Lame Deer Middle School on the Northern Cheyenne reservation here in Montana, and has had enough documented success that it is now expanding to 30 more schools across the nation.

The expansion of Turnaround Arts is great news for arts education. Even though a relatively tiny number of schools will benefit from Turnaround Arts' efforts, the success of this national program sends a message: the arts are a proven and powerful tool for whole-school reform, and one extremely effective tool to close the achievement gap.

This message is reinforced in an editorial by the National Association of Elementary School Principals, where they identify "Four Steps to Close the Gap." Step number three is integrating the arts into the curriculum:

"Recent research has shown that when principals – especially those in Title I schools – employ arts integrated strategies, the students who participate are four times more likely to be recognized for academic achievement, have higher GPAs and, later, higher SAT scores, and show significantly higher mathematics proficiency. Indeed, proficiency in math and other subjects seems to increase the more arts are integrated into the curriculum. Plus, these benefits are more pronounced in high-poverty, low-performing schools."

There are other successful arts-based school reform efforts besides the high-profile Turnaround Arts initiative: The Whole Schools Initiative in Mississippi, Higher Order Thinking (HOT) Schools in Connecticut, Value Plus Schools in Tennessee, and the A+ Schools program in North Carolina, Arkansas, Oklahoma and Louisiana. The following is from the executive summary of research conducted on Mississippi's Whole Schools Initiative (WSI):



VSA Montana teaching artist Carol Poppenga works with students at tiny Geyser School on Highway 200 between Great Falls and Lewistown.

"WSI schools that effectively implement arts integration were found to have reduced or actually eliminated the academic achievement gap for economically disadvantaged students."

Read that sentence again. Using arts integration, they actually eliminated the achievement gap in some schools.

How much more evidence do we need that the arts are the answer for many of our students? It is no easy task to be an arts education advocate. In the face of overwhelming evidence that what we believe in works, every

day we are still fighting the good fight in an overall climate where the arts are supported in some schools and in some communities, but not in all schools and communities.

Some is not enough, especially in Montana, where only 43% of school districts treat the

Too many young people are falling into this opportunity gap, and while the arts are certainly not the whole answer, they can help fill that gap.

arts as core curriculum, and 11% of schools offer no high-quality arts experiences at all.

Despite those sobering facts, the good news is that remarkable arts learning is happening in many Montana schools and communities.

Here are just a few examples from my recent travels:

- VSA Montana teaching artist Carol Poppenga provided art lessons this school year to students at tiny Geyser School on Highway 200 between Great Falls and Lewistown, as well as 10 rural schools and Hutterite colony schools in the Lewistown area. Her smallest school, in Shawmut, had only two students.

- Artist and storyteller Monte Yellow Bird worked with 5th graders at Ponderosa Elementary in Billings, a Title I school with limited resources, but with parents who are incredible advocates for the arts. The Parent Council funded part of the residency, and a partnership between the Montana Arts Council and OPI's Office of Indian Education filled in with the remaining funding and technical assistance.

- Jefferson Elementary School in Helena is one of the few public elementary schools in the state that integrates the arts into core curriculum. Each year the parents organize a day-long gala to celebrate the arts, involving every student in the school. The gala also includes an art auction to raise money for next year's activities, since the arts programming in the school is almost entirely supported by the school's parents.

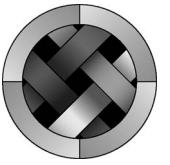
- Montana Shakespeare in the Parks' Montana Shakes! program introduces the works of Shakespeare to elementary school audiences by creating a shortened version of one of the Bard's plays, combining Elizabethan language with our modern language, and using audience participation to engage young students. The tour is growing every year, serving a larger number of schools across Montana and Wyoming.

It's exciting to see these and many other arts learning projects happening in Montana schools, but too many students still do not have equitable access to arts education.

Malissa Feruzzi Shriver, a powerful advocate for arts education in California, recently wrote a piece about the expansion of Turnaround Arts into more schools and why the model is a success. What is generally referred to as the "achievement gap," in education she refers to as an "opportunity gap." When a school is provided the resources and technical assistance to implement something that is proven to work – like arts integration – the school, its staff, and its learners have the opportunity to succeed and transform the school culture.

Too many young people are falling into this opportunity gap, and while the arts are certainly not the whole answer to the problem of why too many students struggle at school, the arts can provide a lot to fill that gap:

- Another way to learn;
 - A way to build critical habits of mind that lead to success;
 - A way to transform a school culture from a place labeled as "failing," to a place rich with music, art and joy.
- And until we fill that gap for all students, and not just for some students, our work is not finished. Grab a shovel.



7

Music training sharpens brain pathways, studies say

A story published online at www.edweek.org reports on new studies released during a recent meeting of the Society for Neuroscience in San Diego:

"At the Youth Orchestra Los Angeles, a student sits poised with her bow at a practiced angle to her violin, her eyes following both the written notation in front of her and the conductor's direction, aware of both her own music and the sounds coming from fellow students' instruments."

"New research suggests that the complexity involved in practicing and performing music may help students' cognitive development. Studies released last month at the Society for Neuroscience meeting in San Diego find that music training may increase the neural connections in regions of the brain associated with creativity, decision-making, and complex memory, and they may improve a student's ability to process conflicting information from many senses at once. Research also found that starting music education early can be even more helpful..."

Read the full story at www.edweek.org.

Applications open now

Artists in Schools and Communities grants

The Montana Arts Council is now taking applications for its FY15 Artists in Schools and Communities grant program. Grants are available to Montana schools, arts and other community organizations with nonprofit status for arts learning projects that strengthen participants' knowledge and skills in the arts.

Guidelines for projects occurring between July 1, 2014, and June 30, 2015 are posted on the MAC website at www.art.mt.gov. The grant application process is online.

Grant requests may be made for amounts up to \$10,000 and require a one-to-one cash match.

The Arts Education program has four distinct components:

- **Art Learning Partners:** These are select Montana arts organizations that have a proven record of providing high-quality arts learning experiences to participants both regionally and across the state of Montana.

- **Arts Learning Experiences:** These consist of arts learning projects lasting from one to four hours with a core group of learners.

- **Artist Residencies:** These consist of five or more hours of hands-on, participatory instruction for each core group of participants with the same teaching artist(s). The time may be concentrated or spread out over several weeks or months.

- **Special Projects:** This funding broadly supports the creation of projects that establish, expand, or advance both school curriculum and arts education programming – for example, workshops or mentoring for classroom teachers or teaching artists, or training for arts organization staff on arts learning topics.

Please contact Director of Arts Education Emily Kohring at 406-444-6522 or ekohring@mt.gov for more information.